

Advancing Australian Democracy

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In 1838 a *People's Charter* was published in England that recommended:

1. Annual Parliaments
2. Universal Suffrage [All males over 21 to vote]
3. Equal Voting Districts
4. No Property Qualification [for members of parliament]
5. Voting by [Secret] Ballot
6. Payment of Members

All but #1 has come about, and #2 has been exceeded – all people over 18 now can vote; is it not time that was ‘over 16’?

In 1947, Churchill (House of Commons, [Hansard, November 11th, 1947](#)) said: “‘Government of the people, by the people, for the people’ still remains the sovereign definition of democracy.”

‘Democracy’ comes from the Greek δημοκρατία (dēmokratía) literally ‘Rule by People’.

Well, Australian government is evidently rule OF the people, but is not so obviously always FOR the people; sometimes powerful vested interests manage to sway decisions in their own favour.

And government is very seldom rule BY the people. Once every three years, we spend a few minutes numbering two federal government ballot papers (probably knowing little or nothing about the candidates), either to reinstall the existing federal government or throw them out and put in the other lot. This right is undeniably extremely valuable. To achieve just that has taken many centuries and cost countless lives. Would that it were enjoyed by all other countries.

Churchill, in the same speech, said:

... it is not Parliament that should rule; it is the people who should rule through Parliament”

But we, the people, do not govern. We moan about ‘them’. Some of us write letters or emails to members, ministers, editors, place ideas on social media, sign Change.org petitions, and take part in protests. Just occasionally some of those actions seem to work. A few of us work in policy groups, and aim through publications and lobbying to get government acceptance of their policies.

There are however major disconnects between electors and politicians:

1 Candidates and politicians

Who are these people on the ballot? Who are these politicians? How many electors actually make a reasoned informed choice when they vote? What are the candidates qualifications, education, life experience, previous experience in government (and was it any good!).

2 Policies

How is an elected member supposed to discover the approximately 100,000 electors' views on various policies?

3 Monitoring

How can electors discover if their representatives honoured those views in parliamentary votes?

4 Constitution

It is the constitution, and consequential decisions by the high court, that controls the parliament. Yet it is the parliament that has the authority to initiate a constitutional referendum, and will usually do so (from experience of the fate of such referendums) only with bipartisan support. Such referendums are rare, typically consisting of simple questions with only yes/no answers permitted.

So how can we "*rule through Parliament*" if the rules for parliament are not in our hands?

It is through today's communications technology that these four serious disconnects could be removed by creating suitable websites. And whilst it would be sensible to focus initially on the political arena, we are not solely ruled by governments (federal, state and local); our lives are also controlled to a significant extent by unelected entities, from company boards to main stream media.

So let us look again at the above four areas in more detail.

1 Candidates and parliamentarians

During the Australian 2019 federal election campaign, it might have seemed that electors were better informed about candidates than ever before. There was certainly quite a lot of coverage in local papers, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) website carried a lot of detail.

Nevertheless, for example, take my own electorate – Warringah – which the ABC had marked as a 'key seat' (presumably because the Liberal candidate was the controversial former prime minister Tony Abbott). Their list of candidates initially covered only 8 of the 10 people standing. Later, once all 10 were listed, 5 had only name, picture, party, and a link to a party website. On reaching such a website, further searching was needed to access that particular candidate's details *if present*. Of the 5 candidates with some direct ABC coverage, the extent of the text varied considerably in length and detail. This is not the fault of the ABC; candidates should have supplied more information.

A web site dedicated to candidates' details could publish a template, seeking minimum information from and about each person, and could show the extent to which they had complied. For goodness sake, we are selecting employees here!

It would be reasonable for party candidates to point to a national website for a list of policies, but even then they might want to present local policies themselves, and obviously independents would be expected to provide considerable detail about their policies.

After an election or by-election, most of such material would remain on the website as archival data, though some of it might be transferred to a section giving information about those elected.

There is no doubt that there would be potential overlap with some official web sites, particularly those of the federal and state parliaments, and the ABC. As long as there are no factual conflicts, that should not be a problem; more information is better than not enough.

2 Policies

This is huge.

Coverage is eventually needed for all government policies (federal, state and council) though in some instances it should be the government's "[policy not to have a policy](#)"! (line 1601 of the script of the "Yes Minister" episode "The Bed of Nails").

Eventually there also needs to be attention given to policies from many other groups that effectively rule our lives. Perhaps these are some of the key areas on an inevitably incomplete list:

- courts and law
- businesses
- agriculturalists
- academics
- main stream media
- civil service
- religions
- the Internet

We do not have many votes to control such groups (except sometimes as shareholders, provided major shareholders do not completely rule the AGM) but that must not stop us from elaborating our views about how these spheres of society are run; they massively control our lives – in some instances more so than government. Where relevant, those groups are, or should be, subject to control by law, so that would bring the discussion back into government.

It is years since the United Nations adopted the [triple bottom line](#) concept, which argues that businesses should not only concern themselves with their financial success, but also care for the social and environmental effects of their activity. Some now argue for a [fourth bottom line](#), adding terms such as 'spirituality, ethics, purpose, culture, and compassion' to the list. Businesses are expected to exhibit corporate social responsibility if they wish to enjoy a [social license to operate](#).

So a system should present to the reader a list of policies, with expert advice but tailored to an intelligent but lay reader. Any registered elector can then log in to the system and register a mark for each policy, say from 1 to 5:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral or don't know
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The web page on each policy would be accompanied (much as on Wikipedia) by a discussion ('talk') page, thus allowing questions about and suggested variations to the policy.

In order to log in, the elector needs to create an account, and to set various details in a profile, some of which could derive from the electoral roll. The system would need [electoral roll access](#), which is about the only aspect of this whole concept requiring some official approval.

Electors would then be able to vote on any policies. Their votes would be completely secret, but aggregate totals of people's opinions would be available to anyone, thus affording elected members an understanding of those feelings, filtered for example by electorate, gender, age range, and so on.

One thing is certain at present: elected members have no easy way of understanding their constituents' opinions on most aspects of government – a deficiency in dire need of fixing. How are they supposed to represent us if they do not know our views?

Policies would need to be written and explained by subject matter professionals. This is not an area for open access editing (unlike, for example: Wikipedia) though any logged on user would be entitled to add remarks to the 'talk' pages, and if such a user is clearly well versed in a particular issue, might be invited to contribute to the relevant substantive page.

It is only practical to start in a limited way, probably by restricting a system to a few key areas of federal government policy, perhaps most importantly the existential threat posed by human-caused climate change.

A partial example of the system described above is the ABC's [Vote Compass](#) exercise, though it remains to be seen how long that link remains active after the 2019 Federal Election.

Starting the Vote Compass system presents you with:

PROPOSITION 1 OF 30

How much should the government spend to address the disadvantages faced by Indigenous people in Australia?

Followed by a choice of button from:

- Much less
- Somewhat less
- About the same as now
- Somewhat more
- Much more
- Don't know

3 Monitoring

The mirror requirement of electors providing their opinions on policies is for them to be able to monitor how their representatives vote in parliament on those policies. One of the challenges to discovering that is the fact that many decisions in parliament are taken "*on the voices*". This, and further items below, are explained by a [Parliamentary Education office document](#):

“...the Speaker or President asks members of parliament to cast their vote by saying 'aye' or 'no'. The Speaker or President announces the result after listening to the response. If no-one challenges that announced result, the matter is thus decided. If the result is challenged by more than one member of parliament, a division is called.”

Except when a division is called, there is no record of how each member or senator voted.

“On the voices” is a procedure which saves at least 4 minutes, during which the division bells ring to allow members to enter the chamber, and a further time during which members move to their chosen side of the chamber, to allow them to be counted and each member’s vote to be recorded.

It is surely time that parliament took on some sort of technology to allow any division to be taken in seconds and each vote recorded. Prior to that happening, we have available the records from formal divisions thanks to one project from the [Open Australia Foundation](#), namely [They Vote For You](#), which with the possible coming of automated voting in parliament has the potential to be extremely accurate. Visit <https://theyvoteforyou.org.au> and enter the name of a member or senator of interest.

One way in which it might be possible to bring about such a change is for two members consistently to challenge every ‘on the voices’ judgement, thus forcing a division. That would probably open the way quite soon to a review of voting arrangements!

4 Constitution

Parliament is ruled by the constitution (and consequent high court decisions) but the constitution can only be changed by a referendum proposed by the parliament. Such a circularity would be regarded as completely unacceptable in most spheres of life. Phrases such as “being judge and jury in your own case” come to mind.

For example, proposals have been put forward to provide for proportional membership of the house of representatives, whereby a party achieving, say, 15% of the popular vote would be entitled to about 15% of the members. It is self evident that this idea is not attractive to the major parties, and therefore is unlikely to be presented in a referendum to the Australian people. Something like this approach, the MMP or Mixed Member Proportional system, is in use in New Zealand, and in German federal and state elections, as well as the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

Added to that, any referendum is going to be worded as simple questions with only YES or NO as permitted answers. Perhaps that is inevitable, but it should be preceded by a reasoned public debate in which citizens can propose and discuss constitutional changes in detail, and indicate their preferences in a more graduated manner.

For example, in the year 2018 a number of federal parliamentarians were judged in the high court as having breached clause 44.i (dual citizenship). It would seem appropriate to reconsider the effect of that clause, especially for a country in which a recent census showed that nearly half the population were either born overseas or had one such parent, thus conferring on them dual citizenship.

A constitution that bars half the citizens from standing for federal or state parliaments? Outrageous!

This is not the place to debate section 44, but I would argue that it should be deleted *entirely*. Now where might I sensibly take part in such a debate? Where might citizens propose other amendments

to the constitution? Such activity is something that some elected members might not want to occur, because it would threaten their positions or views!

Funding and participation

This whole exercise would best be funded independently of governments and corporations unless those bodies were prepared to agree to fund unconditionally. There could be instances where a particular policy was directly against their interests.

It might be appropriate to seek a tiny donation from every elector who chooses to login to the system. If that were say \$10 a year, and 10% of the electorate (16.4M at the 2019 federal election) decided to donate, \$16M could pay for lots of space, equipment, bandwidth, electricity, and staff.

Authorship of policies on each topic, would, I suggest, need to rest with those who have studied the topic in detail, can write clearly for the lay person, and provide explanatory material to identify possible consequences of any policy choice. Electors would have the opportunity to present their thoughts on the ‘talk’ pages.

There are plenty of policy groups, often part of universities but also independent think tanks, who should leap at the chance to present their ideas to the entire electorate. It would indeed be a competing venue for ideas from various groups on all sides of the political spectrum.

Would electors bother to take part? Well, although it was a far simpler system than the above: “About 1.3 million people used Vote Compass during each of the 2013 and 2016 election campaigns, making it the largest survey of voter attitudes ever undertaken in Australia.” and in 2019 there were over [1.6 million responses](#) (presumably about 10% of the entire electorate).

There are of course issues about self selection. A voter has to choose whether to take part in any opinion survey, be that Vote Compass, the sort of system suggested here, or a pollster’s phone call. Indeed, voting itself entails some self selection. Some people choose to turn up and vote merely to avoid being fined, but if they feel the exercise is worthless, they may well vote informally, that is, by spoiling their ballot paper.

If electors discover that a particular opinion with which they disagree is gaining ground on the proposed system, then perhaps that would spur them on to participate!

Next steps?

Any systems of the sort advocated above will obviously want a lot more detailed work, but the decision to go ahead with any or all of the four parts thereof:

1. Candidates’ database
2. Electors’ policy preferences
3. Members’ performance
4. Constitutional debate

could well simply be answered by ‘try it’! A small subset of the above can already be found in several places around the world.

So there is the challenge to those keen on taking Australian democracy a big step further. Do it.